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Divertissements: 1984 and the Staff

By STEVEN R. WEISMAN

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 14 — Nearly two weeks after the Congressional election, President Reagan and his aides are struggling through hours of budget meetings. And as if on cue, a twin set of concerns is rising to the surface as a divertissement at the White House.

The first is when Mr. Reagan should decide and make public his re-election plans. The second is how to adjust the President's strained staff structure to the problems of the next two years, and how to deal with published speculation that the staff is at war with itself.

In the first category, conversations with top Reagan aides suggest that the President really hasn't made up his mind about running for re-election and doesn't intend to do so for a while. The internal "working assumption," as aides say, is that he will run, but there are differing views about when he should make his decision final.

James A. Baker 3d, the White House chief of staff and principal political strategist in the 1982 campaign, is known to feel that Mr. Reagan should decide by next June and announce formally by September. But some of the Californians at the White House, for example, Michael K. Deaver, the deputy chief of staff, are known to feel he can delay his announcement until later.

Request by Bush

Mr. Baker was reported to feel that Presidents Ford and Carter waited until it was too late to mount their campaigns, and that mid-1983 would not be too soon to worry about raising campaign funds.

"The system is not like it used to be," said a proponent of this view. "Even if you're President, you have to make an effort to raise money. It doesn't come in automatically."

Another argument for an early decision is that, should he decide against running, Mr. Reagan ought to leave as much time as possible for other Republicans to assemble their campaigns. Vice President Bush, for example, has called on the President to make his intentions known early.

White House officials seem genuinely to believe that Mr. Reagan will run and that he is sending signals of his intentions. The selection of Senator Paul Laxalt of Nevada, one of Mr. Reagan's closest friends, as general chairman of the Republican National Committee was construed as one such signal.

David R. Gergen, the President's assistant for communications, said

that three factors made it likely that Mr. Reagan would seek re-election.

First, he cited Mr. Reagan's comment that he is not the type to "walk away from a job." Second, Mr. Gergen said the President seems "remarkably comfortable with the job and its pressures." Third, he predicted that "a parade of people in Republican leadership positions" would beseech him to run to avoid a party bloodbath in choosing a successor.

"It's clear he's aged much less, at least in appearance, than previous Presidents," said Mr. Gergen. "My gosh, he's put an inch and a half on his chest just from working out in his upstairs solarium. He's in terrific physical shape. And this is a man who really enjoys the exercise of power."

Why, then, might Mr. Reagan not run? Aides speculate that if the economy is foundering and his anti-Government campaign loses its appeal, Mr. Reagan would be realistic and retire gracefully. "Psychologically, he doesn't need it," added an aide. "He's not a man who's driven to hold on to public office."

Another factor is health. The President does, in fact, get fatigued on occasion, and his wife, Nancy, might well insist on retirement. Mr. Reagan would be making his final campaign at the age of 73.

Planning Sessions Questioned

Whatever his thinking, Mr. Reagan is likely to approach it with a flair for suspense. "The actor that's still in Ronald Reagan understands the drama of the situation better than most of us," said an aide. "He'll do it his own way and do it well."

As for staff squabbling, strains are clearly evident these days even among the "troika" consisting of Mr. Baker, Mr. Deaver and Edwin Meese 3d.

Many aides allying themselves with Mr. Baker and Mr. Deaver, for instance, privately question the need for the elaborate and lengthy planning sessions that Mr. Meese has set up to establish priorities for the next two years.

Conservative columnists and journalists, in turn, seem to have stepped up their attacks on Mr. Baker recently, charging that he has caused the President to "betray" his principles on budget and tax issues. Their prediction is that Mr. Baker will resign soon, yielding power to Mr. Meese or to William P. Clark, the national security adviser.

Mr. Baker and Mr. Meese vigorously deny the speculation, and one top aide said Mr. Reagan was prepared to scotch the rumors had he been asked about them at his news conference last Thursday evening. In

conversations, senior White House aides say that no departures are planned, even though Mr. Deaver has been saying recently that he still might return to private business.

But everybody agrees that things could change if the post of Attorney General or Director of Central Intelligence were to become vacant. A top aide said that Mr. Baker would be interested in either job. Another speculated that Mr. Meese might resign next year if he felt his planning meetings had been successful.

Difference on the Budget

Despite denials by both men, several officials agreed that Mr. Meese was less sympathetic to the need to cut the military budget than Mr. Baker. Some say this is because Mr. Baker inevitably takes a more realistic view of the political climate in his capacity as senior liaison representative with Capitol Hill.

In any case, for 20 months, the "Big Three" have had breakfast every morning at 7:30 in Mr. Baker's office. Quietly, they abandoned the practice a few weeks ago, sending off a ripple of speculation of new strains in their relationship.

White House aides insist, however, that the three simply decided that they had grown so accustomed to their roles that they no longer needed to go through the breakfast exercise just to show their unity. They meet together each day anyway with other senior staff aides, and then again with the President at 9 A.M.

They also frequently break off in the morning for quick "rump sessions" among themselves.

On day-to-day matters relating to the Administration's primary preoccupation, the economy, Mr. Baker remains the master of the process because of his role in relating policy to the political realities on Capitol Hill.

But many Administration officials say that Mr. Reagan continues to turn to Mr. Meese as the man he trusts the most for advice on policy issues. That fact alone, these officials said, will continue to create tensions in the Reagan White House in the months ahead, especially if Mr. Meese and Mr. Baker clash over whether the President should compromise his principles on the budget or other matters.